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ABSTRACT

To find out whether the portrayal of mothers in young adult novels reflects real-life mothers and the many social and political changes of the past 20 years, a study examined 33 books selected from Booklist. The books had to have realistic and contemporary settings and include a characterization of a mother. They were examined for attributes that would reflect how competent and responsible mothers were, if mothers were able to make thoughtful decisions, and if mothers were self-loving. In contrast to the one-sided portrayals of mothers in young adult literature of the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, the fictional mothers in this study were characterized in a variety of ways. In the books examined 39% of the mothers worked outside the home (in a variety of jobs); about 30% were passive and/or unable to cope; many did volunteer work, had interesting hobbies, and had strong self-concepts; several had loving relationships with their husbands; none was idealized. Findings suggest that fictional mothers more closely reflect real-life mothers than was previously true. (SR)

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Images of Mothers in Literature for Young Adults

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Does the portrayal of mothers in young adult novels reflect real-life mothers? In the past twenty years many social and political changes have occurred that provide opportunities for women to have better jobs, provisions for child care and assistance for education. Many mothers, both single and married, have used these opportunities to further their education and/or work outside the home. I wanted to know if the fictional mothers reflected these changes. When young adults read books that include mothers what messages are the teenagers receiving?

First, some background. During the 50's, when young adult literature came into its own, mothers were characterized as consistently loving and helpful - much like the mothers on the sit-com series, for example, Leave it to Beaver. They lived their lives seemingly through their husbands and children. Diane Stavn, in a study of 300 books, described these mothers as insipid ladies who flutter. They were uninteresting, and although they did not cause problems for their children, they were lacking in sense of self, they were not positive role models. They were not portrayed as having any job outside the home and, even worse, no other interests.

Another type of mother appeared in young adult literature during the 60's, one who was the cause of any problem the children had. These mothers were cruel and domineering or

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thoughtless and self-centered. What ever their personalities were like however, insipid or cruel, they shared one thing in common; they, too, stayed at home.

In the early 70's the new Jersey NOW Task Force reported that the mothers in 134 books they analyzed stayed at home and the rare mother who worked outside the home paid the price. The NOW Group reported on a story about a bully whose abnormal behavior was attributed solely to the fact that his mother worked, in contrast to the good boy whose mother was home all day. They found only three fictional mothers who had outside jobs, although, at the time, the United States Office of Labor reported that thirty-eight percent of all working women had children under the age of eighteen.

My own sense of a realistic and positive portrayal of a mother would be one trying to balance her own needs with those of her family. In 1975, Betty Friedan wrote that the assumption of a mother's own identity, equality and even political power does not mean that she stops needing to love and be loved by a man or that she stopped caring for her children. I believe that struggle for a balance is a powerful force in women's lives today. And also for today's young people, both genders, as they assume adult roles.

I analyzed thirty-three books selected from Booklist. The books had to have realistic and contemporary settings and include a characterization of a mother.

I looked for attributes of the mothers that would reflect how competent and responsible they were, if they were able to make

thoughtful decisions, were they self-loving. Working outside the home is only one facet of a realistic portrayal. I was more interested in how mothers handled changes, like an outside job. Did books published since 1975 reflect more closely the realities of mothers' lives? Is there more of a balance and therefore more accuracy between the very positive and the very negative depictions of mothers in young adult literature?

Several books in the study characterized mothers in a period of transition from homemaker to wage earner. A realistic portrayal of the difficulties a woman may encounter is described in One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte. Her husband objects to her desire to be a teacher, but does not want to deny her right to educate herself. He uses the appearance of the house as a way of showing his objections, complaining about books being left out. He falls back on the age-old argument, "I don't think it's fair to the kids." (97) He insists the kids need someone there for them and of course the someone should be the mother. Actually both children work and have lives of their own. Eventually the husband does agree to the mother working as a teacher. While she is struggling to gain independence though she is fostering a dependent behavior in her son. She wants to hang on to what she believes is important - housework and mothering. She is in the throes of transition, and a reader sees throughout the novel her struggle to become independent but fearful of the changes.

Another example of a mother in transition is Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice? The mother is portrayed as a peace keeper, the go-between for her two daughters and her husband.

She decides to become a substitute teacher and a sense of an emerging independent woman is evident throughout the novel. She is a loving mother and her independence helps her to stand up for what she knows is right for her children.

Other books in the study portrayed mothers as progressing through this period of transition. In some cases, the transition was instigated by divorce or death, for example, Tiger Eyes by Judy Blume, A Place Apart by Paula Fox, and Divorce Express by Paula Danziger. One of the books, Notes for Another Life by Sue Ellen Bridgers, described a mother who felt she had to make a choice between her children and a successful career, and she decides on the career.

About thirty percent of the books in the study described mothers who were passive and/or unable to cope. Mental illness or alcohol might be the reason, but some merely lacked, in Mary Wollstonecroft's words, "sense and independence of mind." Garden of Broken Glass by Emily Cheney Neville and I Will Call It Georgie's Blues by Suzanne Newton are examples of this image. Another group of mothers could be characterized as having lost the sense of what it was like to be a teenager. Their personal interests and values took precedence and were usually in conflict with those of their children. They seemed immature themselves and often dependent on a husband: for instance the mothers in Up in Seth's Room by Norma Fox Mazer and Killing Mr. Griffin by Lois Duncan. Of course, this portrayal, too, is realistic. I think it is important for a multitude of images to be available for teenagers. This includes mothers who abused their children or were cruel and thoughtless.

Probably the most positive image was described in IOU's by Ouida Sebestyen. Annie is a single parent with a teenage son. She enjoys life in spite of difficulties with money. She helps her son grow into independence. She is strong, competent and has a joyful knowledge of self.

In summary, the fictional mothers were characterized in a variety of ways. No one image overshadowed all others, as seemed to be the case in earlier studies. The mothers were not insipid but involved in interesting roles. Although not all worked outside the home, many did volunteer work, had interesting hobbies and had strong self concepts. Several of the mothers, and in one case a grandmother, had loving relationships with their husbands. Even when the mother was portrayed negatively she might be shown as doing interesting things, for instance, a gypsy or a welder.

In this selection of books, thirty-nine percent were wage earners or were preparing to enter the labor force. Considerably lower than the 1980 census report that fifty-five percent of all adult women who have at least one child under the age of eighteen are in the labor force. The mothers who did work outside the home held various jobs: teacher, nurse, secretary, child caretaker, real estate agent, writer, window designer, doctor, interior decorator. My favorite was a carpenter who opened her own construction company.

None of the mothers were idealized. Even the most positive images lost their tempers, made mistaken judgements and acted immaturely occasionally. Mothers were described as loving as

well as interesting and intelligent. There appeared to be no one pattern that characterized these mothers, thus no stereotype was created. A mother might work outside the home or not, be married, widowed or divorced, have several children or one and still be described as competent, loving and interesting. Because of -the diversity of mother images I believe, as a whole, the fiction mothers more closely reflect real-life mothers than was previously true.

... A presentation given at the Popular Culture Conference, New Orleans, Spring, 1988